

Converting to Privatization: A Discourse Analysis of Dyslexia Policy Narratives

Rachael E. Gabriel 
University of Connecticut

In this study, I analyze written testimony submitted to the state legislature regarding Connecticut's 2014 Act Concerning Dyslexia and Special Education (PA-14-39), in order to engage with the discourse and rhetoric occasioned by the policy-making process and investigate the phenomenon of dyslexia in contemporary education policy. Drawing on critical discursive psychology, positioning theory, and narrative policy analysis, I examine how dyslexia advocacy discourse forms a cohesive, compelling policy narrative. I argue that this narrative can be understood as a conversion narrative, which drives a privatization agenda in which public schools become mandated consumers for a growing dyslexia industry, and in which the nature of instruction for students with reading difficulties is narrowly prescribed.

KEYWORDS: discourse analysis, dyslexia, education policy, reading

Dyslexia is a contested construct within and across the fields of education, medicine, and psychology. Debates about its definition, etiology, prevalence, diagnostic criteria, treatment, and relationship to theories of literacy development have continued for more than a century (Elliot & Grigorenko, 2014). Recently, there has been a surge in successful dyslexia advocacy, legislation and certification options in the United States (Gabriel, 2018a). Since 2010, 42 states have passed dyslexia-specific legislation, due in large part to the advocacy efforts of parent organizations and the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) (F. Eide, 2019). As part of a larger project aimed at understanding dyslexia as a phenomenon within

RACHAEL E. GABRIEL is an associate professor of literacy education at the University of Connecticut, 249 Glenbrook Road, Storrs, CT 06269-3033; e-mail: rachael.gabriel@uconn.edu. Rachael uses discourse analytic techniques to investigate education policy issues, especially those that relate to literacy leadership, instruction, and evaluation; teacher education, development, and evaluation. Her current projects investigate supports for adolescent literacy, state literacy policies and teacher evaluation systems.

contemporary education policy, I examine the written testimony of advocates and others who wrote in support of Raised HB5562, later PA-14-39, which reflects an advocacy platform put forth by Decoding Dyslexia, an organization with active chapters in 49 U.S. states and 4 Canadian provinces. Drawing on critical discursive psychology (CDP, Wetherell, 1998) as a framework for both theory and method, and using analytic concepts from positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), and narrative policy analysis (Roe, 1994), I examine how the subject positions and story lines made relevant within written testimony work to construct a policy narrative that has implications for public understandings of literacy, dyslexia, and public schools. Specifically, I discuss how testimonials are constructed as conversion narratives, which support efforts to privatize literacy instruction for students with dyslexia labels. This inquiry is guided by two research questions:

Research Question 1: How do testimonials submitted to the state legislature describe stakeholders' experiences with dyslexia?

Research Question 2: How do stakeholders position themselves and others in written testimony related to recent dyslexia legislation?

Background and Context for the Study

Reading achievement is often the target of public policy and school reform. Therefore, all U.S. states have multiple laws related to the identification and remediation of reading difficulties among school-aged children. Reading-related policies are often included within legislation aimed at increasing equity and achievement, especially among students from traditionally underserved communities or underachieving schools, or as part of larger school reform or special education laws (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act, 2001; Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, 2008). Dyslexia-specific legislation, on the other hand, often appears as standalone policy aimed at the identification and remediation of reading difficulty for students with a specific profile of reading difficulties. For example, before 2014, Connecticut had three recent laws related to reading assessment and instruction in elementary school, all of which were passed as part of large packages of education or civil rights legislation including: An Act Concerning Educational Equity, Act Concerning the Achievement Gap, and an Act Concerning Early Literacy. Each had multiple provisions related to teachers, students, schools, community partnerships, district leadership, and so on, and could be considered comprehensive packages of legislation bearing the hallmarks of the accountability era (Loeb & Figlio, 2011): increases in standardized assessment, data-driven interventions, and increased data use.

In 2014, the Connecticut legislature passed An Act Concerning Students With Dyslexia (PA 15-97), a law relating only to screening and support for dyslexia. Instead of increasing accountability for literacy outcomes in general, dyslexia-specific legislation increases the specificity of existing laws, by specifying how dyslexia should be defined, diagnosed, and addressed (Gabriel, 2018a). Before 2014, Connecticut schools and districts were able to choose how they screened for reading difficulty under comprehensive reading-related legislation. The dyslexia-specific law limits choices of screening tools to those published by a list of five commercial providers (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017), and specifies that in-service professional development must include information about “evidence-based structured literacy interventions for students with dyslexia” (An Act Concerning Dyslexia and Special Education, 2014). Rather than extending the logic of accountability policies, which hold that reporting requirements, incentives and sanctions will improve outcomes, dyslexia-specific legislation focuses on mandating specific assessments, instruction, and teacher development products. This signals a shift from holding schools accountable for outcomes to prescribing particular remedies, thus creating a market for these tools and approaches with guaranteed demand across the state.

The structure and content of dyslexia-specific legislation across U.S. states is remarkably similar because it is often the result of advocacy efforts led by chapters of the group, Decoding Dyslexia. Though there is no central leadership for Decoding Dyslexia, the general website (www.DecodingDyslexia.org) notes, “Each state organizes and inspires its own local movement by networking with families and professionals” and lists the following shared policy goals:

1. A universal definition and understanding of “dyslexia” in the state education code.
2. Mandatory teacher training on dyslexia, its warning signs and appropriate intervention strategies.
3. Mandatory early screening tests for dyslexia.
4. Mandatory dyslexia remediation programs, which can be accessed by both general and special education populations.
5. Access to appropriate “assistive technologies” in the public school setting for students with dyslexia (Decoding Dyslexia, 2018).

Part of the initial motivation for this study was to understand how these legislative priorities came to be understood as significant policy problems (Coburn, 2006) given that they represent dyslexia-specific versions of activities already required by several existing state laws. Though similar in focus to existing legislation, dyslexia-specific legislation evoked a different response from the public during the policy-making process in Connecticut. Table 1 shows the distribution of written testimony received by the education committee of the state legislature for each of the last three laws related to reading described above.

Table 1

Testimony Submitted by Stakeholder

	Teachers/ Professors, <i>n</i> (%)	Parents, <i>n</i> (%)	Children and Adults With Dyslexia Labels, <i>n</i> (%)	Private Companies, <i>n</i> (%)	School and Nonprofit Organizations, <i>n</i> (%)	Total Written Testimony, <i>n</i>
An Act Concerning Dyslexia and Special Education, 2014	21 (19)	35 (32)	15 (14)	8 (7)	26 (25)	105
An Act Concerning Education Reform in Connecticut, 2010	2 (10)	—	—	3 (15)	16 (80%)	21
An Act Concerning Closing the Achievement Gap, 2011	—	—	—	1 (5)	21 (95)	22

Where acts concerning reform and achievement involve administrators and nonprofit organizations like State Commission on Children and Commission on Child Development with no submissions from students or parents, dyslexia legislation received five times the total number of written testimonials from any stakeholder group, more than half of which were from parents and children.

The recent work of dyslexia advocates has not happened in a vacuum. Advances in neuroimaging and genetic research have allowed scientists to identify and map differences in activation patterns for those with and without reading difficulties, before and after interventions, and to identify genes that may be implicated in the genetic transfer of tendencies for dyslexia. Studies related to treatment and remediation confirm that children with dyslexia labels can demonstrate growth in the areas of reading and spelling either through increased efficiency of unique activation pathways, or through reorganization of initial pathways as a result of intervention (see Cornelissen, Hansen, Kringelbach, & Pugh, 2010; Pugh & McCardle, 2009). Still, researchers on the cutting edge of the field consistently caution that such studies are in their infancy and do not yet have direct implications for instruction (cf. Pugh & McCardle, 2009). In fact, the approach advocated by the IDA has changed very little since the early 1930s despite advances in the neurosciences, psychology, and education (cf. Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners & Educators, 2018).

As psychologists and neuroscientists learn and share more about the neurological processes involved in reading, members of disability rights communities have been demonstrating more of the potential benefits of neurological differences, an idea that fuels the neurodiversity movement (Walker, 2004). The concept of neurodiversity relates to the sometimes-hidden benefits of cognitive profiles associated with disability labels. In the case of dyslexia, this is perhaps best symbolized by the common conflation of dyslexia and giftedness. Books (e.g., B. Eide & Eide, 2012), films (cf. *Dyslexic Advantage*, 2015), and even centers for research (e.g., the Yale Center for Creativity and Dyslexia) reinforce the idea that children with dyslexia labels have unique talents and may eventually be highly successful adults even if they struggle in school with literacy tasks.

Taken together, the coupling of dyslexia with gifted, creative or “twice exceptional” labels, and the message of the neurodiversity movement, which highlights the benefits of many neurological differences previously viewed only as deficits (e.g., autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), may distance dyslexia from some of the shame and deficit framing that many disability labels still carry. For example, Connecticut’s current two-term governor is open about his own dyslexia, as well as other learning disabilities, and his difficulty during elementary school before identifying strategies to support him through college and law school (Reitz, 2011).

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Interestingly, lists of successful entrepreneurs and other famous adults with dyslexia are populated almost exclusively by White males. As Hoyles and Hoyles (2010) note,

Dyslexia, though neurological and present worldwide, is experienced through culture. It may once have been an advantage and may well be again with the importance of visual literacy in the computer age. In a literate society, however, it is more of a disadvantage and is compounded by racism. (p. 209)

Though differences in identification and reporting patterns make it nearly impossible to estimate the relative prevalence of dyslexia across demographics related to race and class, research on learning disability identification in general strongly suggests that dyslexia labels are both applied and experienced differently depending on race and class (Blanchett, 2010; Sleeter, 1987). Explicit references to race are not present in this data set, but Connecticut's history of wide opportunity gaps and funding inequities based on racial and socioeconomic factors should be acknowledged as context for this data set (cf. Eaton, 2007).

In addition to applied science and social advocacy, for-profit companies surrounding dyslexia have also seen a surge in activity in recent years. Though difficult to quantify, there has been a marked increase in the volume and distribution of dyslexia-related training, services, and materials (Bedell, 2002). The IDA, formerly "The Orton Society," a small society of members, has grown into a 10,000 member professional organization. It now serves as an accrediting body for new dyslexia certification programs, which are spreading nationwide in response to increased awareness of the need for dyslexia-specific services and, in some cases, new state legislation that requires specific training or certification (e.g., Arkansas, see Gabriel, 2018a). As certifications and requirements for training and programming increase, so do the markets for commercial materials and training programs (cf. The Alliance for Certification and Accreditation of Dyslexia Specialists, 2018). A rapidly growing dyslexia industry differentiates dyslexia from some other diagnostic labels associated with the category of specific learning disabilities (e.g., dyscalculia, dysgraphia, etc.), but may be similar to the industries surrounding autism and related therapies (Custer, 2011).

Discourses of Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a disability label applied to individuals with a particular profile of reading difficulty (Spear-Swerling, 2016). In a related study, we used framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006; Woulfin, 2015) to investigate how testimonials for dyslexia-specific legislation differed from those submitted for other bills aimed at increasing reading achievement or supporting students with reading difficulties (Gabriel & Woulfin, 2017).

Our analysis of the diagnostic (problem), prognostic (solution), and motivational frames contained in written testimony demonstrated that testimonials crafted in support of dyslexia legislation, framed dyslexia as a personal tragedy, exacerbated by schools that neither identify nor specifically address it. Unlike reading difficulty in general, which is considered a societal problem with implications for state reputation and the economy, the burden of dyslexia is borne by individual students. Their parents often report relying on private providers for recognition and treatment (Gabriel & Woulfin, 2017). The remedy for the problem of dyslexia is to require public schools (the problem) to take on the practices and tools of private providers (the solution). In other words, we argued that *the ability to read* was framed as a collective challenge exacerbated by socioeconomic problems and ameliorated by policies that simultaneously increase funding and accountability for public schools. *Dyslexia*, on the other hand, is framed as a family's burden, exacerbated by the school system, and ameliorated only by private providers using particular instructional programs.

The emphasis on private providers of reading assessment, diagnoses, and instruction aligns with Lubienski's (2016) definitions of privatization in education, which include "transformations in the nature of a good from a public good to that of a consumer-driven commodity" (p. 247). That is, the public good of reading assessment, instruction, and intervention as delivered in public schools is deemed insufficient for students with dyslexia labels. Instead, advocates often claim that private assessment and intervention are required to meet the needs of children with dyslexia labels. They therefore argue that schools should be required to provide specific, often branded approaches for identifying and addressing dyslexia.

As Cameron and Billington (2015) demonstrated, adults with dyslexia labels may choose to take up a range of both positive and negative subject positions when discussing their own dyslexia diagnoses, including being intelligent/able, being a survivor, being "just who I am," being a hardworker, being worthy/deserving, being disabled, being a fraud, and being deficient. Findings from their study highlight the complexity of personal meanings surrounding dyslexia as well as the ways in which these meanings are made visible in and through discourse. Across literature on the impact of the dyslexia label on individuals, teachers, and families, there is a tension between the morality associated with literacy in Western cultures, and the idea that dyslexia is a valuable label despite signaling reading difficulty (Cameron & Billington, 2015).

Previous research has also examined the impact of specific disability labels like dyslexia, compared with more generic labels like reading difficulty or special needs. Gibbs and Elliott (2015) found that teachers reported higher self-efficacy beliefs when asked about teaching students with reading difficulties than students with dyslexia because of an underlying belief that dyslexia is an immutable phenomenon. On the other hand, Taylor, Hume,

and Welsh (2010) reported that students with dyslexia labels report equal self-esteem as controls with no disability label, and higher self-esteem than those with general special needs labels. This suggests that children and adults might hold different meanings of the same term. Researchers have therefore suggested an “ambivalence perspective” on the use of dyslexia as a label for a specific kind of learning disability (Solvang, 2007), noting that some parents, teachers, and organizations representing people with dyslexia report that the label is empowering while others view or experience it as stigmatizing and counterproductive to the learning process.

Theoretical Framework

This study is part of a larger investigation of dyslexia as a phenomenon in contemporary education policy. The overarching theoretical framework for this study is CDP (Wetherell, 1998), a synthetic approach to discourse analysis that combines traditions of fine-grained analysis of the action orientation of talk and text with those that engage a broader focus on macro-level elements of discourse with implications for understandings of power and positioning (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). CDP is unique among other critical approaches to discourse analysis because of its focus on the discursive construction of psychological themes and phenomena. Discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) emerged from the field of social psychology as a critique of cognitivist approaches to the study of language, which view talk as a window to or mirror of inner thinking. Drawing on social constructionist theories, discursive psychology developed as a way to understand talk and interaction as constitutive, rather than only reflective, of psychological phenomena. Discursive psychologists thus work to “respecify” attitudes, cognition, emotion, attribution, and other psychological phenomena as discursively constructed rather than existing only in the mind (Tileaga, 2012). As a methodological approach, discursive psychology is concerned with the situated, contextual use of language to understand how phenomena are assembled, used and undermined in talk (MacMillan & Edwards, 1999). In this case, I assume that concepts like dyslexia, literacy, and disability are worked up in and through language, and I investigate how language is used to both demonstrate and shape understandings of each. In doing so, I understand the function of language as both informed by and constructive of the larger social and political context in which it occurs (Wetherell & Edley, 1999), which aligns with a critical approach to discursive psychology, rather than one that is focused primarily on individual interactions without significant analytic engagement with the larger social and political contexts.

Following other CDP studies, this analysis includes consideration of subject positions, interpretive repertoires and the management of dilemmas in talk and text (Wetherell, 1998; Wiggins, 2017). Within CDP it is assumed

that “people use discourse rhetorically in order to accomplish forms of social action” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 118). That is, I assume that talk and text both construct and are constructed by the social realities worked up in particular settings. In this case, the texts of written testimony are both constructive of the discourses of dyslexia policy in a given state and constructed by such discourses.

CDP traditionally makes use of some of the methodological tools of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) by attending to micro-level features of discourse such as sequencing, lexical choice, and pronoun use. Given that written testimony does not include many of the micro features of transcribed talk often analyzed on conversation analytic traditions (Schegloff, 1997), including turn-taking sequences, pacing, pauses, and intonation, this analysis attends to the production of text (e.g., use of all capital letters, images, bold words, quotations, etc.), the structure and format of text, the sequence of ideas, and word choice as potential micro features of discourse. By considering the action-orientation of micro-level features (i.e., What the text is “doing”), I do not assume to be able to identify the author’s intentions or rhetorical goals. Rather I focus on patterns in how language is used, and what subject positions, dilemmas, and interpretive repertoires are made relevant within each text (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In this study, this means identifying the subject positions that surface in written testimony (the writer and others they mention) as well as the rights and responsibilities assigned to these positions.

Positions, unlike roles, are flexible and contingent based on moment-to-moment interactions (Davies & Harré, 1990). For example, though a testimonial may be written by someone with the role of district administrator, they may assign themselves several different subject positions within the same testimonial, that of a concerned parent, a responsible adult, and a Connecticut voter. Each of these is associated with a different set of rights and responsibilities for what they can/should and cannot/should not say and do.

Interpretative Repertoires

Interpretative repertoires are “a culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes . . . [which] comprise members’ methods for making sense” (Wetherell, 1998, p. 400). Similar to Foucault’s concept of discourses, interpretive repertoires are recognizable sets of words, phrases, and story lines that evoke particular meanings. Yet, interpretive repertoires are understood to be more flexible, contingent and malleable than a discourse as they are (re)constructed within moment-to-moment interactions rather than accumulating over time. They are a set of meanings and understandings that are evoked in conversations so that “the whole argument does not need to be spelt out in detail. Rather, one fragment or phrase . . . evokes for listeners the

relevant context of argumentation—premises, claims and counterclaims” (p. 399). For example, the word “impeachment” might (in some contexts) evoke for listeners the relevant context of politics, ethics, and criminality the same way that the phrase “home run” might evoke the context of baseball, or more broadly: competition, athletic prowess, and success.

Subject Positions

In addition to considering the broad repertoires constructed and indexed across the data set, I draw on analytic concepts from positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) to identify the action orientation of available subject positions. Positioning theory is a framework for analysis that works to analyze subject positions by considering the rights, responsibilities, and story lines that come to be associated with each. It has been applied to analyses of discourse as detailed as individual classroom interactions, and as broad as public relations strategies, political campaigns, and the position of multinational companies in relation to each other. The central premise of positioning theory is that language always works to position the self and the other (self/other may represent a group, organization, or nation) and that these positions have implications for the socially constructed rights and responsibilities of each entity.

Story Lines and Narrative Policy Analysis

When taken together, story lines and subject positions can be used to identify the broader structure of policy narratives (Gabriel & Lester, 2013a, 2013b). Narrative policy analysis (NPA) focuses on the centrality of narratives to convince the public of particular formulations of policy issues using narrative structures and literary devices that evoke culturally familiar structures and tropes which add a set of meanings and associations to a particular policy issue (Roe, 1994; Stone, 2002). Successful policy narratives portray particular formulations of policy issues as imminent policy problems that warrant particular policy solutions (Coburn, 2006; Stone, 2002). In this study, I use the analysis of subject positions, rights, responsibilities, and story lines to highlight patterns in the structures, features, and devices that are associated with particular narrative forms that may evoke specific meanings and histories and implications for policy.

This blending of approaches to the analysis of discourse follows Torfing’s (1999) suggestion that “discourse theorists must remain methodological bricoleurs,” because “a totalizing master methodology would serve only to repress new and alternative forms of analysis” (p. 292). I have therefore braided together approaches with social constructionist underpinnings to create transparent connections between micro-level features of text, meso-level interpretations of its action orientation, and more macro-level

interpretations of the context, implications, and consequences of these texts in the social world.

Methodological Approach

Data for this study included written testimony received by the education committee of the Connecticut state legislature as they were considering an act concerning dyslexia. Testimony provided to the committee is scanned and stored as PDFs in open-access online archives and are maintained online as open, public records. The data set included the testimony of 105 individuals and organizations, who wrote in support of or out of concern regarding a public act that was eventually passed by the Connecticut state legislature in 2014. All documents were downloaded to facilitate organization and analysis. The analytic process proceeded as follows.

First, I renamed and organized all files according to the information the writer provided about themselves. This most often included their name, role/organization, home town, and relationship to the issue of dyslexia (e.g., parent of child with dyslexia, adult with dyslexia). Then, I began by engaging in line-by-line repeated readings of each testimony, paying attention to patterns in specific lexical choices; text features such as bold or italicized text and pictures or other images; and devices, including the use of quotations, statistics, personal anecdotes, and descriptions of specific emotions; and any repetitive words, phrases, or names that appear across testimonials. I noted common themes across personal anecdotes in terms of the information included, the structure of the stories, and the inclusion of information about specific solutions (e.g., programs and providers). As might be expected given the organization of the submission of testimony, many of the parent letters shared common features such as a similar structure (e.g., introduction, anecdote, plea) and similar statistics and talking points. For example, many parent testimonials referenced statistics released by the Yale Center for Creativity and Dyslexia about their estimate of the prevalence of dyslexia (“1 in 5 children”). This statistic stood out to me because it is much more liberal than most other estimates, including those disseminated by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2017), which suggest that 1 in 5 students has a learning disability, of which dyslexia may be one possible specification.

After identifying patterns across the testimonials, and noting the sequence of ideas as well as the words, phrases, and formulations used to accomplish the common structure of introduction, personal story, and plea, I analyzed the subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) made available within each testimonial by considering both how the writer identified themselves, and how they used language to position themselves and others within descriptions of problems and solutions related to each policy. I did

this by first attending to introductions at the beginning of each testimonial (wherein authors identify themselves) and then noting what other individuals and entities (e.g., school systems, children, companies, researchers) were included and in what ways throughout each testimony. Wetherell (1998) suggests that one way to identify subject positions and dilemmas is to

look for variability in accounts and formulations—tracking the emergence of different and often contradictory or inconsistent versions of people, their characters, motives, states of mind and events in the world—and asking why this (different) formulation at this point in the strip of talk? (p. 392)

Therefore, as I considered the relevant subject positions, I began to track the rights and responsibilities associated with each position within and across testimonials by considering: According to the testimony, What must individuals in this position do? What should individuals in this position be able to do? What variations on these positions are evident across testimonials?

Crafting a matrix of potential rights and responsibilities for all available subject positions allowed me to consider overlap and patterns of positioning both in terms of those who had similar rights and responsibilities and in terms of the roles most often associated with each position (e.g., teachers, administrators, parent, child). It also allowed me to identify and confirm patterns and anomalies across the data set, thereby accounting for and understanding potential sources of variability. The remarkable consistency of these patterns is likely the influence of the grassroots effort to organize parents to write in response to dyslexia-related bills. Still, the matrix allowed me to seek confirmation and disconfirmation of emerging patterns in order to enhance the transparency of my interpretation.

Considering the combination of rights and responsibilities in conjunction with patterns in the stories, statistics, and pleas shared, I began to list a series of words and phrases, which evoke interpretative repertoires and are used to work up story lines or patterns in the ways testimonials develop. These story lines were combined to identify the type of narrative(s) most often constructed within the testimonials. For example, I began by looking for the subject positions that related to recognizable stock characters (e.g., heroes, villains, protagonists, antagonists) and for plot structures (e.g., conflict and resolution, journey, episode). I realized right away that even though testimonials included ideas, stories, and anecdotes that were personal, they did not follow the conventional structure of personal narratives with a plot progression of rising action leading to a climax and resolution. Likewise, they often did not include a single protagonist or identifiable antagonist entangled in a conflict. Rather, testimonials contrasted student, teacher and parent lives and experiences before/after they became aware of or were diagnosed with dyslexia and engaged with a particular treatment; often highlighting dramatic before-versus-after contrasts in identity, experience, and quality of life.

Testimonials regularly began with descriptions of difficulty in school and then words and phrases such as “finally,” “at last,” and “it wasn’t until” marked the transition to stories of understanding and success as a result of diagnosis and treatment. I considered genres that include this structure and found that the use of stark before/after structures within a personal story is most closely related to the genre of conversion narratives. Within conversion narrative individuals create contrasts between past selves and beliefs and current selves or beliefs as a result of their moment of salvation or enlightenment (Szpiech, 2012). I then researched the characteristics, histories, and meanings associated with conversion narratives drawing on research in fields in which this form is most relevant, including English and religious studies. I briefly synthesize information related to conversion narratives in the section that follows. Finally, I engaged in a final rereading to seek confirmation and disconfirmation of patterns and to identify elements that conflicted with or extended the identified narrative pattern.

My analytical lens is informed by my experience as a public school teacher, reading specialist, private reading tutor, and teacher educator. As an employee of a private psychoeducational practice, I attended trainings for many of the dyslexia programs referenced within the data set. I also received related training as part of graduate coursework in literacy and voluntary professional development opportunities. In addition to being exposed to dyslexia-related instructional tools in both public and private professional settings, I regularly consult with teachers, schools, and districts working to reconcile constantly evolving state requirements with their current systems for assessment and intervention.

In the section that follows, I discuss the narrative form that best describes the structure and features of most testimonials, the conversion narrative. In doing so, I describe the history of conversion narratives as a genre of oral and written communication and discuss associated meanings, which informed my identification of this subgenre of personal narrative as descriptive of the testimonials I analyze within the data set described below.

Conversion Narratives

The conversion narrative is a subgenre of narrative writing often composed to be read aloud or recited at public gatherings (Szpiech, 2012). Scholars have identified several purposes for the conversion narrative across historical time periods and contexts. For example, a public recitation of a personal conversion narrative was required for membership in certain religious organizations, particularly among Puritans in the 17th century. More recently, journalists have noted that weight loss program infomercials often follow the structure and conventions of conversion narratives (Burke, 2015) within which a story is told with stark before/after contrasts, which are often illustrated by images; a simple secret holds the answer to an otherwise

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elusive life change; this secret is capable of changing everything; people can purchase or buy access to the powerful secret that will change their lives; and their loyalty and commitment to the program determines their success.

Historically, religious conversion narratives have been understood as both defensive and offensive (Szpiech, 2012). Speakers or writers defend their new religion by describing the horrible things that happened before conversion and then contrasting these with all of the wonderful things that happened as a result of conversion. This recasts the self as a believer or insider within a community whose merits are highlighted by anecdotes, examples, and before/after contrasts. As Pallotti (2012) explains, “the public delivery could be effectual in instructing, exhorting, comforting, teaching and edifying the believers who, by sharing their experiences, helped one another construct their (spiritual) identity as part of a close-knit community” (p. 74). As much as these narratives work to promote and exalt a chosen religion, they also function offensively to craft arguments against other sets of beliefs (Szpiech, 2012). By constructing a chosen religion as the polar opposite of prior or other belief systems, the conversion narrative offensively minimizes and argues against anyone or anything considered outside the chosen religion. This can create a black-and-white, us versus them, in-or-out mentality wherein any link to an outside belief is considered heresy. No room is left for alternatives. For example, as Szpiech (2012) demonstrated, arguments that served as the foundation for anti-Semitism can be traced to examples and metaphors used within some Christian conversion narratives. That is, distrust and even hatred for alternative systems is sometimes a byproduct of conversion narratives. This offensive and defensive work is also evident in advertising for weight loss and exercise programs, which demonstrate their worth by explaining why and how other programs fail.

More recently, Maruna, Wilson, and Curran (2006) analyzed conversion narratives among individuals who are incarcerated. They described how describing one’s conversion from a past self functions as a shame management and coping strategy that gives purpose, meaning, and hope. They argued that prisoners construct and share conversion narratives as a way to declare a turning point, break, or new direction, which separates them from a painful past and predicts a positive future.

Similarly, scholars have drawn parallels between personal narratives constructed within Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings and conversion narratives (cf. Cain, 1991; Greil & Rudy, 1983; Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Based on Cain’s 1991 research, Holland et al. (1998) argue that “the stories that AA participants learn to tell about their former lives and their current temptations . . . become the cultural resource that mediates members’ identities as ‘non-drinking alcoholics’” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). Membership in this new community “requires accepting the idea of alcoholism as an incurable disease that affects all areas of one’s life, and accepting the idea of oneself as an ‘alcoholic,’ one who is powerless over

alcohol” (p. 96). This also requires revaluing past experience as evidence of alcoholism to embrace the new identity. Holland et al. (1998) note

In spite of all the possible variations, the personal stories told in AA are remarkably similar . . . AA members come to fit the events and experiences of their own lives into the AA story structure and so to identify themselves in the figured world of AA. (p. 82)

The parallels between stories about a painful past of academic struggle before the moment of diagnosis and engagement with a private provider are both structural and functional. The narratives presented in written testimony follow the genre-specific conventions of describing a stark before/after picture, using anecdotes to illustrate the extremes and reciprocally outlining the faults of an old approach as the benefits of the new are recited. They also function to identify a single solution and minimize other alternatives—a function which I will argue has important implications for the current trend toward privatization. When narratives identify salvation as occurring outside of or in spite of public schools, it fuels efforts to privatize reading and other education services.

In the Findings section, I describe the nature of available subject positions, and the patterning of rights and responsibilities into story lines and repertoires. I argue that testimonials work up two bluntly polarized positions: those who believe in dyslexia and dyslexia-specific approaches to instruction, and those who do not, without room for compromise or nuanced positions. Illustrative extracts from the data are presented throughout the Findings section in order to support efforts to make the analytic process transparent and to invite the reader to consider other possible interpretations. Extracts were selected because they were representative of consistent patterns and concise enough to present in isolation as illustrations of each pattern. They are presented verbatim with emphasis, text features, punctuation, spellings, and errors preserved from the original testimonials.

Findings

The section that follows illustrates the subject positions made relevant and available within the data. It is followed by a discussion of the rights and responsibilities assigned to each available subject position, examining how the contrasts and polarization of public schools and private providers is accomplished by evoking particular story lines with the before/after structures of conversation narratives, and particular character types such as the hero, antagonist, and savior.

Polarized Institutional Positions

Across the data set, there were 13 testimonials submitted by students, many of whom also attended hearings to read their testimonials in person. Though students varied by age and gender, their testimonies included

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descriptions of similar experiences as students with dyslexia in public school. The extract below is an example from a student who introduced himself as a 10-year-old who was “here to speak in support of Bill RHB 5562, An Act Concerning Special Education to get dyslexia recognized in the State of Connecticut.”

Extract 1: I have dyslexia. Reading and math are really hard for me. I've had to many teachers that don't understand how to teach me. Finally, this year I went to Lindamood Bell training and reading is getting easier.

Extract 1 is one of many examples of a consistent formulation for the story of children with dyslexia, within which public school teachers do not recognize, acknowledge, or address students' difficulties, but private providers using specific programs do, and this “finally” makes a difference after a long struggle. The extract begins the way conversion narratives often begin, with a statement of identity in specific terms, followed by a discussion of what this has meant in the past, contrasted with what it now means for the present and future (cf. Holland et al., 1998). In this extract, public school teachers and Lindamood Bell-related providers are positioned as opposites. Though both are assigned the responsibility to “understand how to teach,” many teachers do not meet this responsibility, but as a result of training from outside the school setting, “reading is getting easier.” The word “finally” suggests that what comes after it is in some way final or an end point for whatever came before. In this case, the past tense “I've had to(o) many teachers that don't understand how to teach me” is contrasted with his experience after going to Lindamood Bell training.

The sequence and proximity of the first two sentences suggest that they are related to each other: (because of dyslexia) “reading and math are really hard for me.” The use of the present tense (are) suggests that this has not changed, though “reading is getting easier.” What has changed, however, is exposure to Lindamood Bell training, which is contrasted with having many teachers who do not understand how to teach him at school. Importantly, the student does not suggest that he is misunderstood or that the teacher does not know how to teach, but rather the teacher does not know how to teach him and that teachers do not know how to teach students who “have dyslexia,” but someone from Lindamood Bell training does. The use of the brand name rather than the program (Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes, 2017, creates materials and training for several programs aimed at addressing reading, math, and speech difficulties) is also consistent across narratives within which children, parents, and teachers name the brand (e.g., Wilson, Orton-Gillingham) rather than the specific program or provider.

This emphasis on brand-name approaches is positioned in contrast to public school offerings, which are always unnamed. This can, at times, be

confusing as public school teachers may have brand-name certifications and/or the knowledge and materials to implement brand-name programs. Some public schools contract with brand-name program trainers to train and even certify staff members. However, within the data set brand names are only associated with private providers who are sharply contrasted with public school teachers. Even teachers highlight the need for schools to embrace specific brand-name programs in their testimony as seen in the extract that follows. Extract 2 is drawn from the beginning of a statement in support of Bill RHB 5562 submitted by a former classroom teacher who now tutors for a volunteer organization that teaches English literacy to adults. She wrote,

Extract 2: Approximately 50 years ago, I taught special education in a self-contained classroom with only eight students, a half-time aide, and with a good physical environment—all factors conducive to success. I loved those children, but I failed to teach them to read, because I did not know how. I was so discouraged that I left teaching. Approximately 25 years later, I learned the Orton-Gillingham approach to teaching reading, and I have been successfully teaching dyslexic students to read since then.

Though this teacher is not describing her own journey with dyslexia, her description of teaching students with dyslexia mirrors the structure of the story told by children and parents: first there was long-term, abject failure, then a private provider intervened and brought success. Extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) are used to dramatize the tragedy that she “failed” the children she “loved” because of her lack of knowledge. The problem is located in the area of teacher knowledge, and the solution is identified as the Orton-Gillingham approach.

The teacher’s discussion of “50 years ago” and “25 years later” allows her to discuss failure while still saving face or managing her stake (Edwards & Potter, 1992). She admits being a failure 50 years ago, thus distancing herself from that unknowing teacher from so long ago, and says she has been “successfully teaching dyslexia children” for 25 years—a long time to do anything successfully—thus positioning herself as a long-standing success. The pivot point in her identity as someone who fails and someone who succeeds is her training in Orton-Gillingham methods. Her knowledge of these methods is part of her current successful teaching identity. Though the teacher does not discuss the context in which she learned or practices the brand-name approach, her teaching experience before and after exposure to it is described in starkly contrasting terms: from failure to success. An example of a similarly structured parent story appears as Extract 3.

Extract 3: We raised our concerns with the school on multiple occasions but were told [student name] was performing at grade level. We subsequently had [student name] tested independently and got a clear

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diagnosis of dyslexia from respected educational psychologists. We were then unhappy with the support [student name] received from the special needs system in [Connecticut Town], and we ended up moving him at the beginning of this year to [Private School] in [New York Town], which is a specialist dyslexia school.

Extract 3 positions parents as having the right to raise concerns, and public schools as having a responsibility to address parental concerns. When public schools failed this responsibility, the parents had the responsibility to withdraw their child from public school. The phrase “ended up” suggests that this option was a last resort or final option, thus positioning it as more of a responsibility than a right. Had the parent written that they “chose,” “elected,” or “decided,” it might have indicated more willingness than duty on their part.

As in Extract 1, the public school is positioned as failing its responsibility over a long period of time, while private providers (psychologists and private schools) succeed in both naming/acknowledging and addressing the concern. The student is positioned as having the right to receive support, and the parents are positioned as having a responsibility to evaluate that support and make decisions about the setting in which support is received. In this case that meant moving to a private school in a neighboring state.

The public school’s failure is highlighted by the fact that “independent” and “respected educational psychologists” provided a “clear” diagnosis. “Clear” constructs the diagnosis as obvious though the school missed it. The plural “psychologists” suggests that more than one would agree with the clear diagnosis. Finally, the adjectives that modify “psychologist” work to construct this private service provider as unbiased and authoritative. This construction of independent (private) educational psychologists is contrasted with the public school that denied there was a problem. The parents go on to note

Our experience is that the teachers at [public school] were unable to spot the signs of dyslexia in our son that we could clearly see. Alternatively they could see the challenges and did not have an incentive to push for a diagnosis.

In contrast to the two previous extracts, which assume teachers lack knowledge or understanding, these parents suggest an alternative: teachers may lack “an incentive to push for a diagnosis.” This positions teachers as either thwarting or impeding a student/family’s quest for a diagnosis that explains reading difficulty in the way that an antagonist thwarts a hero’s progress on their journey. Positioning the school district as the antagonist then positions the alternative as a savior, in this case a private school in another state. This suggests that a separate, distant, and private alternative was required because of the failures and shortcomings of the public school.

Given the contrasting subject positions assigned to public schools and their generic or unnamed forms of instruction, when compared with private providers and brand-name programs, I hypothesized that testimony submitted by representatives of schools would resist the negative positioning of public schools as being unable and/or unwilling to help students with dyslexia. However, Extract 4 is one of several examples of testimony submitted by public school teachers that complicates the public versus private formulation by taking up the negative positioning of public schools even as an insider.

Extract 4: I have been unable to help my students with identification for dyslexia and services for dyslexia in the school districts I have worked in during my 21 years in teaching.

This introductory statement opens the letter of a public school teacher writing in support of the law and advocating that all teachers receive training from private providers. She manages the dilemma of credibility or authority by admitting that she was “unable to help” for 21 years with a hedge that implicates public schools in that failure. Instead of simply stating “I have been unable to help,” she adds “in the school districts I have worked in,” which suggests that this inability is somehow related to the context. This reinforces the story line in which public schools have a responsibility to identify and address dyslexia, but consistently fail to do so despite parents’ demands, and even despite teacher’s desires to do so. Therefore, state legislators have a responsibility to compel public schools to meet their responsibilities by introducing dyslexia-specific legislation.

This set of rights and responsibilities involves several inherent dilemmas. In the section that follows I examine how stakeholders managed the dilemmas associated with advocacy efforts by working up particular versions of what it means to be dyslexic and positioning schools as consistently, grossly negligent.

Rights, Responsibilities, and Dilemmas of Stake and Interest

Part of the challenge of legislative advocacy work is to convince policy makers that a particular phenomenon poses a problem or challenge for the public interest to which there is a policy remedy (Coburn, 2006). In this case, advocates must convince policy makers that dyslexia is a social, rather than personal, problem with implications for the broader social good (Gabriel & Woulfin, 2017) and that it is in the interest of the state to address dyslexia specifically in public school settings. Many of those who submitted testimony disclosed that they themselves or a close relation is dyslexic, which might suggest that they have a personal bias, which is perceived to limit their authority or credibility as speakers (Antaki & Horowitz, 2000). In addition, as a disability label, dyslexia may carry negative connotations with which

speakers wishing to preserve authority and credibility may not want to be associated. The question of whether to disclose or hide a dyslexic identity when arguing for state support of dyslexics raises “a dilemma of stake or interest: how to produce accounts which attend to interests without being undermined as interested” (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 158).

Across examples of written testimony there were two patterns in how writers managed the dilemma of stake or interest. One way was to explicitly link dyslexia with giftedness, creativity, and innovation thus making the education of dyslexic children an issue of public interest rather than only the personal concern of those with the disability labels is one example of this pattern and comes from a letter submitted by an adult who identifies as dyslexic and as the parent of a child with dyslexia.

Extract 5 (emphasis and punctuation are original): This is a disability worth our investment of time It is the disability of Spielberg [*sic*], Einstein, and Steve Jobs . . . Honor us and embrace us. We are continually the great minds of every generation. We are the “game changers.”

The extract begins with a statement about worthiness, which is supported by associations with famous geniuses known or assumed to have had dyslexia. Given such associations, dyslexia is constructed as something to be honored and “embraced” as a mark of “great minds” and “game changers,” rather than as a disability. This formulation of dyslexia as evidence of great gifts, as much as it might be evidence of great struggle, works to construct a version of dyslexia that carries benefits for society as a whole rather than only challenges for an individual. Therefore, the dilemma of positioning dyslexia-specific policies as a state responsibility and constituent right is managed with a series of extreme case formulations (Edwards, 2000), which serve as examples of how dyslexia has and will bring greatness. Lists of celebrities and suggested associations with engineering, creativity, entrepreneurship, and innovation are found across submitted testimony.

The other pattern in the management of stake or interest is to construct dyslexia as common and ordinary rather than unique or exceptional. Though opposite to the first pattern, this pattern minimizes negative associations by suggesting dyslexia is familiar and applicable to a large percentage of the general public. Extract 6 is an example of this pattern in which a parent advocate suggests that her children’s experience in public school and their dyslexia diagnoses are common (emphasis is original).

Extract 6: In Connecticut, my children’s **Failure to Progress** is not the exception, it is the rule. Considering dyslexia has been studied more than heart disease, and **dyslexics CAN be TAUGHT to read**, it should not be taking so long, costing so much or be so hard. There are 3.1M teachers in America and 2.5M students classified with Specific LD, the vast majority dyslexic. Both groups have due

process rights. Does anyone in this room believe that if the dyslexic community were united in exercising their ***due process rights*** as effectively as the Teacher's unions, we would need to be having this conversation today?

This parent highlights the dichotomy of “failure to progress” in public school versus “can be taught to read” in a private 9-week program (as described later in the testimony) with boldface type and capitals for emphasis. She also compares and contrasts two groups “the dyslexic community” and the “teachers unions,” whom she suggest have similar rights and different patterns for demanding them. This positions “the dyslexic community” as a group that is comparable to teachers’ unions, which have numbers in the millions. It also compares teachers and teacher’s unions to dyslexic children and their advocates using this parallel construction to make action seem inevitable. The use of contrasting statistics and data further solidifies and polarizes the contrast (e.g., 2.5 million students vs. 3.1 million teachers; 5 years without progress vs. 9 weeks with great progress).

At the same time that advocates suggest dyslexia is both exceptional and common, advocates must also demonstrate that there is a need for state intervention: that children need state protection in public schools to reach great heights later. In the extract below this need is measured in the school’s own terms (years and grade levels).

Extract 7: My experience with identifying my son [name] with dyslexia is equivalent to presenting myself at the Emergency Room with acute signs of a heart attack and being told to come back in a couple of days when it gets really bad! Due to the delay in identifying my son, he entered 3rd grade reading below a first-grade level; 3 years behind his peers!

Besides the use of exclamation points, both the reference to the emergency room and heart attacks, and the parallel of a multiyear gap in reading performance work to construct the school’s response as problematic without blaming the student for failing to make progress. Just as hospitals have a responsibility to provide immediate medical attention to someone with “acute signs of a heart attack,” this parent suggests schools had a responsibility to respond to her son’s deficit in reading as an “acute sign” of an urgent need. Failure to act in the parallel medical scenario would be associated with criminal negligence on the part of a public institution, for which a state should be responsible.

Another notable aspect of Extract 7 is the parent’s personal stake in the story and the focus on their child as an individual. This extract positions the parent at the center of a struggle to be heard, as the protagonist in a story where the parent valiantly seeks help but is thwarted by an antagonist school

district. In this case the school or district is not actively evil, but passively so in that their inaction and misinterpretation has caused harm.

Some parent testimonials in the data set included embedded color photographs of the child. All included names, ages, and anecdotes about specific childhood experiences. In contrast, testimony provided by teachers, administrators, or other stakeholders rarely named or described an individual. It is not surprising that parent or child testimonials include personal appeals as rhetorical strategies, but the focus on individuals in sympathetic roles (victim, hero) and institutions in negative roles (schools, districts) may be of interest because it casts individuals and families as victims of the negligence or failure of state institutions, thus undermining faith in public institutions (Savas, 2000). This offers further evidence that dyslexia screening should be a public policy issue because it affects more than just individual students, it affects their families too. As the mother in Extract 7 noted, a school's failure to act causes emotional and financial burdens that could affect an entire family.

Story Lines and Repertoires

There is a consistent set of story lines and features across testimony presented to a state legislature when considering an act concerning dyslexia screening and treatment in public schools. Some patterned features are predictable given the context of organized advocacy efforts, purpose and audience of these testimonies. For example, many of the testimonies restate the same set of statistics and slogans about dyslexia, which were likely to have been offered as talking points in *Decoding Dyslexia* materials. Some statistics can be traced to materials produced by the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity (Gabriel, 2018a), which regularly highlights the prevalence and potential benefits of dyslexia. Similarly, many testimonials identify clusters of strengths among dyslexics and highlight the great potential for dyslexic minds to contribute to society.

Beyond these persuasive features, a common story line emerged with stable subject positions and sets of text structures. These patterns constitute an interpretative repertoire for dyslexia in which dyslexia is as much a gift to and responsibility of society as it is a challenge to the individual. This repertoire is made up of the statistics, examples, and metaphors used to evoke this particular understanding of the disability rather than a medicalized, or deficit-oriented understanding. Within this repertoire, one parent (often the mother) is positioned as a heroic figure, fighting for years against an antagonistic school system that systematically thwarts her efforts. Schools referenced in this data set are described as monolithic systems that are incapable and/or uninterested in helping children with dyslexia. This positioning breeds distrust in the motives and abilities of government or public services and suggests control over education for children with dyslexia has had to be removed from the public realm (Lubienski, 2006, p. 250).

Private providers are saviors who rescue parents from years of fighting for recognition by providing an official diagnosis. They rescue students from years of failure by providing a particular instructional prescription: One of a few name-brand programs that are offered by private tutors and training centers. When educators or service-providers are writing, the same subject positions are relevant: the school system has failed, the private providers and outside trainings in particular programs reverse the history of failure.

This consistent story line found across written testimonials also draws on a “lost and found” interpretative repertoire within which students, parents, and teachers are described as lost, unable, unsuccessful, failing until the moment of diagnosis, at which point they are finally found, understood/ understanding, and—with the right instruction—successful. Within the larger storyline, families blame teachers, schools, or “the system” for delaying or denying diagnosis. Diagnosis is required for access to particular brand-name programs and is often offered only by private providers at the family’s expense. Extract 8 provides an example of the way many parents and students discuss diagnosis as a turning point in their lives that marks the beginning of the end of years of struggle.

Extract 8: My mom had to fight to get me the help I need at school. Since the summer I have been working with an Orton Gillingham tutor. We work on the spelling and reading that I need. Since she is working with just me and we are able to work at my pace, I don’t have to worry about other kids in a group. I wish she worked with me before fourth grade because maybe I would have caught up sooner. My tutor understands me. She knows about dyslexia. Sometimes she will teach me tricks to remember things. Even though we work on reading, she has helped me at times with little tricks for remembering math facts too.

The letter that includes the extract above ends with the following:

All dyslexic kids should have the chance to get the right teaching earlier in school and have an iPad so they can read like their friends. Please help me and other kids like me by helping to pass Bill RHB 5562, An Act Concerning Special Education. Dyslexia needs to be recognized and teachers should have the proper training, so they can help kids like me.

This set of quotes from one student’s testimony demonstrates several patterns that are consistently found across the data set. The writer suggests that “all dyslexic kids” have a right to “the right teaching,” to “read like their friends” and to be recognized as dyslexic. By asking the committee to “please help me and other kids like me” he assigns the responsibility to ensure this right to the education committee of the state legislature, largely because schools have failed to meet this responsibility. The student above was diagnosed and taught successfully outside school because, as the

student wrote earlier in the testimony, “teachers don’t understand dyslexia,” but private tutors do.

As in the extract above, writers consistently dated and located the very moment of diagnosis, describing who gave the diagnosis, in what year, after how long and under what circumstances. Receiving access to or training in a brand-name program is described as a turning point, discovery or “aha moment” that marks the moment when a student who was once misunderstood is now understood. The overall text structure is coordinated by transition words marking time before diagnosis with phrases such as “finally,” “for years,” “since age X,” and “at last” and measuring loss in years, grade levels, and peer differences.

This lost and found motif, and the before/after text structures that sustain it across examples within this data set bear a strong resemblance to the structure and function of conversion narratives. In the section that follows, I discuss the implications of this narrative structure for understanding dyslexia as a policy phenomenon and potentially changing the narrative in the future.

Discussion

Within the policy narrative surrounding recent dyslexia legislation in Connecticut, private providers are positioned as enlightened saviors who understand and can save the children brought to them by parents who were savvy enough to doubt their public schools. Public schools are positioned as ignorant, unenlightened, nonbelievers who have not yet experienced the conversion moment—their ignorance is not their fault, but should be abhorred. This aligns with terminology used online and in social media to describe people who question the existence or definition of dyslexia, including “dyslexia doubters” (Barden, 2016) and “dyslexia deniers/denialists” (Hundall, 2007).

The parallels between stories about dyslexia and conversion narratives are both structural and functional. The narratives presented in written testimony follow the genre-specific conventions of describing a stark before/after picture, using anecdotes to illustrate the extremes and reciprocally outlining the faults of an old approach as the benefits of the new are recited. They also function to identify a single solution and minimize other alternatives. In this case, the solution that is identified is the provision of specific approaches to instruction associated with private providers and alternatives include most approaches currently used within public schools. This positioning is, of course, lacking in nuance. As some teachers noted, some public school districts have allocated resources toward training educators in a range of brand-name programs as well as other, evidence-based approaches without brand names attached.

The version of appropriate treatment worked up within the narratives is specific with regard to focus, structure, and location: brand-name, Structured Literacy™ (IDA, 2019) instruction offered by private providers who hold

specific certifications from private providers. For example, nearly a third of all testimonials submitted by teachers, parents, or children mention “Orton-Gillingham” or “Wilson” by name. The Orton-Gillingham approach is based on the work of Anna Gillingham and Samuel Orton in the 1930s and uses visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile strategies to support acquisition of sound-symbol relationships in a systematic sequence. The instruction is characterized by explicit explanations of orthographic rules and deliberate practice with controlled texts. Like many other branded programs on the market, Wilson Reading® is advertised as being Orton-Gillingham-based (Wilson Language Training Corporation, 2019).

Accountability era standards for acceptance of an approach to reading include the requirement of evidence from scientifically based reading research. However, multiple reviews of research related to Orton-Gillingham-based instruction have identified only a small number of studies, of which only a few conclude such instruction is more effective than a comparison, or no intervention (Ritchey & Goeke, 2006), while some conclude it has a negative effect (see International Literacy Association, 2016, p. 3; NRP, 2000, p. 2-160). Based on a review of available research in 2006, the Florida Center for Reading Research (2006) concluded,

. . . although the Orton-Gillingham Approach contains many of the characteristics of effective intervention programs that have been identified in scientifically based research on reading, there are no studies available at present to provide an estimate of its impact on the reading growth of young children. (p. 2)

The US Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) similarly concluded that no studies of Orton-Gillingham (O-G)-based strategies met evidence standards for scientifically based reading research (WWC, 2010). The WWC, created in order to help schools identify scientifically based reading research, stated that they were “unable to draw any conclusions based on research” about O-G strategy effectiveness. There have been no published reviews of research related to programs that advertise the O-G approach, sometimes now referred to by the IDA as “Structured Literacy™,” (Gabriel, 2018b), or any of the programs referred to as O-G “grandchildren” (Lexercise, 2017) since 2010.

Therefore, by the measure of this accountability era standards, O-G and related methods have limited evidence for use. However, in the context of education policies aimed at privatization rather than accountability, these programs and others are held up as exemplars that should be adopted by schools. Despite the lack of scientific evidence, access to such programs is described as a right of students and the responsibility of the state. Testimonials claim that “our teachers have not been taught the science of reading” and that “our schools of education have failed to teach them the science of reading.” Not only does this suggest a single science that is not

in use within public schools, it separates what teachers are taught within academic institutions, from “the science of reading,” which only exists among private providers. Thus, popular understandings of science as associated with academia, federally funded research and public institutions are subverted by another “science,” marked by distrust of public institutions and devotion to private enterprises.

As with religions and diet or exercise plans that include beliefs based on experiences that cannot be or have not been proven scientifically, the absence of a robust collection of independent studies that generate evidence about O-G and related approaches requires faith in the absence of scientific evidence. In these cases, individuals’ personal stories are the inspiration and evidence of what is right and true. The naming of particular brands or approaches relates to the historic purpose of conversion narratives as an opportunity to publicly state membership, loyalty, or alignment with a particular group. This statement of conversion constructs the speaker as enlightened and belonging to a collective that has specialized knowledge, in contrast to having been lost or unknowing in the past. In other words, writers with personal stories about the power of named approaches are positioned as enlightened believers, knowledgeable about “the science of reading,” in contrast to those who either advocate for other approaches or fail to recognize dyslexia; most often identified as teachers and public school officials.

Related to popular faith in the impact of particular programs, the submitted testimony also pointed toward the need for authenticity when dispensing such programs. Those advocating particular programs consistently highlighted the need for public school teachers to become “trained,” “highly skilled,” “certified,” or “qualified” to use particular approaches in their teaching. For example, several testimonials described the benefit of providing teachers with “official” training in The Orton-Gillingham Approach. Official O-G training is accredited by the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators (2017a, 2017b) and must be provided by a certified “fellow” of the academy whose “Founding Fellows” were directly trained by either Dr. Samuel Orton or Anna Gillingham themselves.

In contrast, the methods and approaches involved in accountability-era definitions of a “highly qualified teacher” (e.g., master’s degree and ongoing professional development) are unnamed and likely to include a range of approaches rather than allegiance to or certification in a single approach. The emphasis on a particular training pedigree suggests emphasis in preserving a direct connection to the source of the method as if there is something pure that cannot be approximated by those with other degrees and qualifications. This relates to the historic purposes of conversion narratives, which were focused on establishing insider status and separating from identification with other groups and perspectives. Furthermore, the emphasis on purity and authenticity of particular brands of instruction is connected to a privatization agenda driven by an ideology that suggests that public

institutions are unlikely to provide the best, right, or most appropriate service (Savas, 2000), because “governments are driven by their own ‘self-interest’” (Rizvi, 2016, p. 3) and are therefore less trustworthy and capable than independent service providers (cf. Blackley, 2014).

A privatization agenda aims to make public schools into customers for particular private providers, and enlarge or increase the number of special, private schools for dyslexics with both the state and individual families as their customers. The amounts to what Ball and Youdell (2007) refer to as “exogenous privatization,” which includes “the opening up of public education services to private sector participation on a for-profit basis and using the private sector to design, manage or deliver aspects of public education” (p. 10). This formulation creates opportunity gaps for individuals without access to pure private options.

For example, in a blogpost titled “Schools deny and delay,” Lexercise, an online company offering dyslexia screening and tutoring writes, “We hear from parent after parent that the school is failing their child. Unfortunately, schools deny dyslexia and delay children from getting the right help.” They conclude the post with the following: “Who will help your child? We will.” The cost for the eight Lexercise sessions required before guaranteed improvement is nearly \$1,000, and over 100,000 parents have used the free online screening tool (Lexercise, 2017).

The Lexercise blog is just one among many examples of how for-profit companies might benefit from a large(r) crisis in public schools and narratives that position out-of-school options as the only viable solution. It is also an example of how widespread concerns about dyslexia are among parents. It suggests that, despite all existing public school screening and early intervention programs, more than 100,000 parents were curious enough about possible dyslexia that they took the time to use this online tool. This is similar to the striking volume of submissions of written testimony from parents and children when Connecticut considered dyslexia-specific legislation when contrasted with the absence of testimonials from parents and children related to most other reading-related legislation. Dyslexia seems to energize parents in ways that more collective issues of reading achievement and equity never have.

Implications

Testimonials consistently used language to construct story lines of personal hardship as a result of institutional negligence within public schools. While schools are positioned as protecting their own interests or the interests of a large, generic group of students, parents assume the responsibility to speak up for individual students. This suggests that school professionals who engage with advocates may need to focus on the particular, and

individual aspects of dyslexia experiences instead of collective considerations or approaches that have worked in general.

The use of conversion narratives rather than scientific or economic arguments signals a move away from accountability era ideas about evidence-based practices or standard protocols for identifying and remediating reading difficulties among all school children. Brand-name programs sold by for-profit companies are discursively constructed as religions unto themselves, with educators and families publicly declaring allegiance, attributing miraculous turnarounds to their methods, and describing the moment of diagnosis/training in the same terms as a moment of conversion or enlightenment.

Pressure to embrace specific methods creates challenges for public schools and educator preparation programs working under accountability-era definitions of “scientifically based reading research” and “highly qualified teachers.” Though compliance with new dyslexia legislation may require shifts in approaches to assessment, intervention, and teacher development dyslexia-specific legislation is not often attached to new or existing funding streams. This may have a negative impact on the depth and flexibility of teacher education and professional development (Gabriel, 2018b), opportunities and resources for students with reading difficulties other than dyslexia, and innovative approaches for students with dyslexia. In addition, it has and may continue to fuel the rise of a dyslexia support industry that includes publishers and vendors for dyslexia-specific materials and services. The increasing presence and power of this industry will, in turn, support and amplify advocacy efforts that point to privatization as a solution.

As scholars of the genre have demonstrated, conversion narratives breed distrust and hatred of alternative accounts of the world and alternative approaches to key issues (Szpiech, 2012). Both explicitly and implicitly, this positions public schools as (at best) ignorant and unenlightened, and (at worst) heretics who defy evidence and deny “the science of reading” or the right way to teach dyslexic children (cf. Hanford, 2018; Mason & Adams, 2017). Any school that delays or questions a diagnosis or that assigns a treatment protocol other than those advocated by IDA has been constructed as acting against the best interest of children and families. This aligns with what Rizvi (2016) describes as a “neoliberal rationality” in which the government, or this case public schools, “is no longer identified with the public but is increasingly viewed as merely another economic actor, among many others” (p. 5).

As Lubienski (2016) points out, “understanding ‘privatization’ first requires an understanding of ‘markets’ as the natural forum for private governance” (p. 250). In other words, understanding the privileged position of private providers within dyslexia advocacy efforts requires understanding the marketplace of dyslexia in the context of for-profit disability and education services. Aurini (2008) explains, “Lacking teachers’ claims to professional authority, educational entrepreneurialism is further bolstered by the emerging culture of intensive parenting and educational customization”

(p. 475). Specialized for-profit supplemental education services that used to reap the profits of the testing industry (Picciano & Spring, 2013), now increasingly target special groups and interest areas beyond test preparation, including dyslexia and other learning differences. Specialization in these areas works up a version of authority and expertise that competes with other more traditional indicators. Unfortunately, neither this market nor “edubusinesses” in general are well regulated (Thompson, Savage, & Lingard, 2016). Meanwhile, claims about the nature of dyslexia and the effectiveness of programs are far-ranging and often fantastical. Fervent advocacy for O-G approaches in particular are so common that claims about its effectiveness have become taken-for-granted assumptions about “what we know” and “the science of reading” (cf. Mason & Adams, 2017).

This raises questions about who benefits from the rise of a dyslexia industry that supplements and sometimes supplants reading instruction in public schools. The stunning growth of advocacy, infrastructure, materials, and credentials associated with dyslexia over the past 5 years is evidence of a compelling narrative that supports the diagnosis and remediation of many more children by private providers trained and certified by for-profit organizations that peddle brand-name programs. In some ways, this might be viewed simply as part of the larger privatization narrative within education policy (Boyd, 2007) or as the booming for-profit supplemental education industry’s latest growing market. However, the urgency and singularity of conversion narrative-style testimonies raises larger questions about the nature of a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities. That is, the language used in this data set indicates a narrow, commercially driven view of what counts as appropriate instruction, with a small set of specific commercial programs named over and over again as the agents of salvation. In this way, what may seem like a small, specialized issue related to just one particular kind of reading difficulty may have out-sized implications for understanding and tracing the privatization of public schools and teacher education.

Movement toward privatizing the diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties leaves the right to appropriate literacy instruction for students in U.S. public schools up to an industry that cannot be held accountable by traditional means but claims to be the only solution. At the same time, the rapid rise of polarized rhetoric surrounding dyslexia, and its uptake within parent organizations, shows that the negative impact of current practices runs both broad and deep. Far too many families share similar stories of struggle and failure over long periods of time. Regardless of how this failure is attributed, it has consequences not only for individual student achievement but family finances and for public perceptions of the nature and potential of public schools. Given that a large percentage of the population depend on public schools for appropriate instruction and intervention, this particular policy narrative indicates an urgent need for a change. So far, this change has

come in the form of a nationwide legislative agenda that began with the five-points highlighted earlier and has more recently expanded to advocacy efforts to address teacher preparation, certification, and even classroom instruction in general education settings (Gabriel, 2018b). Despite sustained advocacy efforts, the impact of recent dyslexia-specific policies on public school practices and student experiences remains to be seen.

So, how do you reshape a conversion narrative? Perhaps by presenting a different story line. Until there are publicly shared examples of students overcoming reading difficulties in public schools, state legislators will have no choice but to continue on the steady march toward de facto privatization of reading support. This means a narrowing of available resources to branded approaches, which may not be in the interest of all learners with reading difficulties. Therefore, change must happen on two fronts: public schools need to make existing processes, approaches, and expectations for screening and addressing reading difficulty as transparent as possible to the public. In doing so, room for growth may be found as well as some evidence to restore or create trust. Likewise, for-profit programs must open their products and trainings to rigorous, outside scrutiny in the form of large-scale, independent research studies to allow engagement with a research community capable of producing evidence of effectiveness and feedback for continuous improvement. If such transparency is found to offend the proprietary nature of privately owned educational products, such products should be removed from consideration within public policies.

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ORCID ID

Rachael E. Gabriel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6791-5721>

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